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December 5, 1962

Following is the transcript of an interview with Ambassador Adlai E. Stevenson, U.S. Representative to the U.N., on the NBC-TV Program "Today".

MR. HUGH DOWNS: Good morning, Mr. Stevenson. Since you have been on the Today show many times before, I won't even attempt to apologize for the earliness of the hour and get right to the questions.

Have you had any indication that you might be asked to give up your post as United Nations Ambassador?

AMB. STEVENSON: On the contrary. Let me say something, if I may, about this story in the Saturday Evening Post by Alsop and Bartlett.

It seems to me a remarkable story in one respect. As to me, it is wrong in literally every detail.

It is untrue as to what I proposed. It is untrue as to what I opposed. It is wrong as to when I came to Washington during the week of decision about Cuba. It is wrong about who appointed my assistants and when.

And I could go on. But this must be some kind of a record for irresponsible journalism.

Now, the article comes down to this, as best as I can make out: It charges that I opposed the President's policy on Cuba and that I was the only one to dissent from the consensus of the President's advisors. To put it mildly, this is false. I emphatically approved the blockade on further arms shipments to Cuba.

What the article doesn't say is that I opposed equally emphatically an invasion of Cuba at the risk of world nuclear war until the peace-keeping machinery of the United Nations had been used.

This was the policy adopted by President Kennedy. This is the policy that has worked so successfully that the nuclear menace from Cuba has been removed and war avoided -- and at no cost to the United States.

I hope the time hasn't come in the United States when it is considered better to advocate war to settle issues than peaceful means, because if that time should come the world is doomed.

I think it is time to stop, if I may interpose another thought, the childish talk about hard and soft lines among the advisors of the President. What he wants is cool heads and reason. But probably it doesn't make very much difference about me and the truth. I am used to assassins. I remember McCarthy very well, indeed.

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But the worst thing about this article, the real danger, I think, to our country from such journalism is not just that it poisons the wells of history or that it is calculated to injure me. Rather it is, as the New York Times said this morning which I just read coming over here in the automobile, "...that the secrecy of one of the highest organs of the United States Government has been seriously breached. This organ was, during the Cuban crisis, the top-level advisory group to the President of the United States. How is it possible to believe that the opinions expressed therein can have any value if they may appear in the public press the next day--or the next month? How can advisers to the President be expected to give advice freely and easily and at all times honestly and with complete integrity if they have to worry about what their arguments will look like in print a few weeks later?"

I agree, sir, with what President Kennedy has pointed out, that the various positions of his key advisers taken during deliberations must always remain private, if the President is to have free access to the frankest expression of views. And because I wholeheartedly agree with the President's admonition about the importance of maintaining secrecy in these deliberations, I am somewhat inhibited about telling you more about them.

President Kennedy has had and he will have my views with candor and with confidence in his determination to reach decisions by free discussion among his advisers. Advice is of little value if it is chilled by fear of disclosure or misrepresentation.

We have seen in the Cuban crisis a mature mixture of diplomacy and of national strength; which I think is precisely what is required for effective leadership in this dangerous and hopeful period of history.

Now, you have my whole story of this.

Q All right. I would like to ask you some other questions, if I may, Mr. Stevenson. Did you at any time advocate to the President's advisory committee that the United States give up bases abroad in return for the elimination of the bases in Cuba?

A No, I said that if the United States got into negotiations about the elimination of the base with Mr. Khrushchev, we would have to develop well in advance the content -- the political content of whatever our positions would be. Among those would inevitably be the subject of bases which Mr. Khrushchev would raise.

Q Would you advocate at any time in the future -- an exchange in the future that would involve, say, bases in Turkey, which many experts feel are of little use to us?

A This is obviously a question that I couldn't possibly answer. It would depend upon the circumstances.

Q Did you oppose the idea of a Cuban blockade prior to the decision of the President? It is important to get clarification on this point.

A No. On the contrary, I was emphatically in favor of it. I was against---

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Q You were? Even before as well as after?

A Before what?

Q Prior to the President's decision?

A Oh, long before.

Q You were in favor of it?

A Three days.

Q So that's something that according to the article in the Post---

A Yes, that's just another mistake.

Q Just the opposite. Could you give us the five inaccuracies that you say existed in the -- now you say even more existed?

A Five? I don't know. I couldn't possibly tell you how many there are.

Q You think that's fallacious, more or less, from beginning to end?

A From beginning to end in every detail insofar as I am concerned.

Q I want to ask you -- we have a picture of the executive committee of the National Security Council. In a moment I want to get to that---

A I can give you, if you want to talk about inaccuracies, let's talk about them.

Q All right.

A From the point of view of reporting.

Q All right. Will you hold it for one minute? We are going to be back in one minute and we will talk about those inaccuracies in the Post article and some other things.

* * *

We are here this morning with U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson and discussing an article that appeared in the Saturday Evening Post December 8th, which touched off quite a storm concerning speculation about whether he would be retained as Ambassador to the United Nations. Mr. Stevenson has said that this article, as it applies to him, is filled with inaccuracies, and we are about to discuss some of these at this time.

What are some of the major ones, in your opinion, Mr. Stevenson?

A Well, I must say I can't say that I am too familiar with the sequence of the article, but I recall it mentioned British -- some mention of the British NATO base in Britain. There was no mention, so far as I ever heard of a British base.

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Q You mean in the discussion prior to the President's decision?

A Yes, during the week in advance of the President's decision.

There is discussion about other bases, as though we could deal with them as we saw fit when, of course, they are NATO bases and don't belong to us in that respect.

It says that -- it has the date on which I arrived in Washington as Saturday. I arrived on Tuesday. The President told me about it -- about the news about two hours after he had heard it himself. And I stayed throughout the week except for a day and a half when I had to come back to New York to argue the case against the admission of Red China to the United Nations.

It says that McCloy was sent up here to assist me, or something or other. Actually, Jack McCloy was asked to come here by me.

Q He was not sent?

A No. The President wanted a Republican to participate in these deliberations after the decision had been made in order to -- so that there would be bi-partisanship in this expression of our foreign policy. And it was my recommendation. He was my selection.

This also says, I think, that somebody appointed Arthur Schlesinger to write a speech for me. Actually, I asked him to help me with the speech I had to make---

Q Is this customary or was it unusual in this case?

A It was entirely unusual. I just asked him as an old friend whom I have known for many years to help me out at the last moment when I had to get ready in a hurry.

I think it goes on that way all the way through. I can't say that I saw anything here that bore much resemblance---

Q Well, now, Mr. Stevenson, in the executive committee of the National Security Council, which is the group that the President works with in order -- which met with the President to decide what was to be done in Cuba -- is it so unusual for one member of that committee to voice a disagreement during debate?

A Oh, yes. The only purpose of a group of advisers is to advise.

Q But, I mean, is it unusual for a disagreement in the advisory committee? Would you say it is unusual for there to be disagreement?

A Not at all.

Q In other words, there is disagreement?

A Oh, yes, sure. In this case you saw that in this article -- maybe this is -- I don't choose to comment as I agree with the President's view about the privacy and secrecy of these sessions if they are to serve any purpose to him --

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but as this article points out, there were those who wanted immediately to invade Cuba. There were those who didn't.

Q Now, I would like to know---

A That's an example of disagreement.

Q Since there is disagreement in these things, what significance do you attach, then, to the fact that according to this magazine article touched off this speculation, that mentioning your disagreement, true or not, that that should be immediately interpreted, among newsmen, as tolling your doom as United Nations Ambassador? Why would that happen, do you think?

A But I didn't disagree, you see. Coming back to the fact that I was entirely in agreement with the President and that was the policy that was adopted.

Q No, accepting that this was in error, even though, as you say, you did not disagree, but the fact that it was printed that you had disagreed, why would that touch off such a storm that you might be replaced as United States Ambassador?

A I don't know. Mr. Alsop or Mr. Bartlett personally, but I think I may have met one of them. But I suppose it is because they enjoy the long, personal acquaintance with the President.

Q Do you think there is an active clique out to affect your ouster from the United Nations?

A I have never heard of it before.

Q You do not know?

A No, this is the first time that I have heard this mentioned. I am not sure it will be the last time.

Q We mentioned the fact that Mr. Chester Bowles had left the State Department after disagreeing with the Administration in April of 1961 in connection with the Bay of Pigs invasion. You disagreed with that too.

A Emphatically.

Q Yes, but there was no mention at that time that that might result in your leaving.

A No, because I wasn't told about it in advance.

Q Then you have no idea why now there might be speculation about your leaving when there was not -- when you had a real disagreement back then?

A But I tell you I wasn't told about the Bay of Pigs in advance, so I couldn't have had any disagreement.

Q What about the -- well, you have commented on the fact that Mr. Schlesinger was not assigned but that you had asked him to be there.

A Yes.

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Q And the same way with McCloy.

A Yes.

Q What is your personal opinion, if you would care to give it, of Messrs. Alsop and Bartlett in connection with this article? Would you like to comment on that?

A I would say that it was as classic example of irresponsible journalism as I have ever witnessed, as I said a moment ago.

Q Now, do you look for President Kennedy to make a public gesture of confidence in you? We have news reports this morning that there is indications -- we know up here Salinger's denial of these rumors -- do you expect that the President might in the near future step forward to say something about this?

A Well, I have had no discussion about it. I really don't know what he is going to do, if anything.

Q One other question I'd like to ask you, Mr. Stevenson. In---

A You must understand these things don't trouble me as much as they do some of my friends because I have lived for a good many years in the storm of spheres and political and public life, and I am not unfamiliar with this form of attack, and perhaps it doesn't trouble me as much as it should.

Q The New York News---

A But I think it is really troublesome to think that the privacy of the President's deliberations could be breached, and if I had anybody in my employ and could catch him who did that, he wouldn't last very long.

Q The New York News suggested that the recent tragic death of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt might have something to do with it -- that in that article they said, I think it was Ted Lewis, on December 4, said that Mrs. Roosevelt being a power in the Democratic Party and a staunch backer of you, that this was one reason that nothing was done against you while she lived. Do you care to comment on that?

A I don't think I have heard -- this must be the height -- this must exceed the article for absurdity. I have never heard any such thing before.

Q I am just saying what was---

A She was, I am proud to say, a very old and very dear friend to me. And I am at present Acting Chairman of a committee appointed by President Kennedy to establish a memorial foundation for Mrs. Roosevelt.

Q But you don't think that has anything to do with this?

A I don't see how it could possibly.

Q Well, thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador. We have been speaking, as you know, with Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson in connection with some news that came out of an article in the Saturday Evening Post. And I want to thank you very much.

A Not at all. I am delighted to have the opportunity. Thank you, sir.

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